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USAID MEKONG SAFEGUARDS

USAID Mekong Safeguards promotes smarter, more sustainable infrastructure development, especially in transportation and power generation, to prevent environmental damage and depletion of natural resources in the Lower Mekong region.

USAID Mekong Safeguards is a three-year program (2019-2021) that supports policy makers, government regulators, major financiers, developers, and contractors with information and tools to foster consistent application of environmental, social, and governance standards, particularly for power generation and transportation. USAID Mekong Safeguards helps operationalize the vision of sustainable infrastructure development that Lower Mekong countries have put forward in their respective national green-growth strategies and regional platforms. This vision has been publicly championed by major infrastructure financiers such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and several bilateral donors, including Australia, Japan, and the United States.

PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE INFRASTRUCTURE

The Mekong River Basin, a biodiversity hotspot and source of livelihood for an estimated 70 million people, is being rapidly degraded as large-scale infrastructure projects proliferate across the Lower Mekong countries of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Major donors and lenders are ramping up infrastructure investments in the affected countries, joining new financing vehicles, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism, and ACMECS Infrastructure Fund, among others. With this projected new investment over the next decade, power generation is expected to grow from 96 gigawatts (GW) to at least 280 GW, largely through new hydropower dams and coal-fired power plants. Developers of road and rail infrastructure plans are projecting that over the same period, rail infrastructure is likely to increase by at least 20 percent and high-speed rail capacity will increase over 50 percent.

CONSTRUCTION OF THE LUANG PRABANG BRIDGE FOR THE CHINA-LAOS RAILWAY,
DECEMBER 2018, COURTESY OF COURTNEY WEATHERBY, THE STIMSON CENTER.

Environmental regulations and mitigation efforts are not keeping pace: the sheer numbers and cumulative effects of projects are damaging the Mekong ecosystem, affecting fisheries, forestry, farming, air quality, water quality, and flood regulation. Negative impacts on these and other ecosystem services, in turn, threaten Lower Mekong populations' food security, health, homes, and livelihoods. While recognizing the economic-growth imperative of this underdeveloped region and the role of infrastructure in contributing to growth, USAID Mekong Safeguards promotes profitable economic growth undergirded by sustainable infrastructure that causes less harm to the environment, biodiversity, and people.

IMPROVING INFRASTRUCTURE POLICY, PLANNING, AND PRACTICE

USAID Mekong Safeguards aims to: (i) minimize negative environmental impacts of infrastructure projects by fostering more robust and consistent application of environmental, social, and governance standards; and (ii) encourage decision-makers to avoid unnecessary, harmful infrastructure through smart technologies, system-scale infrastructure planning, and innovations.

ILLUSTRATIVE ACTIVITIES

- Disseminating data and analyses on the environment and socio-economic impacts of current and planned infrastructure projects.
- Supporting regulatory and policy reforms related to sustainable finance, foreign direct overseas investment, and environmental standards for energy and transportation infrastructure.
- Helping financiers, developers, and contractors adopt and apply higher environmental standards.
- Fostering smarter infrastructure planning through tools such as strategic environmental assessments, cost-benefit analyses, participatory processes, and systems thinking.

IMPACTS

USAID Mekong Safeguards will both level and elevate the playing field so that large-scale infrastructure in the Lower Mekong Region is planned and developed in ways that optimize sustainable social, economic, and environmental outcomes.

PARTNERS

USAID Mekong Safeguard is an activity of USAID's Regional Development Mission for Asia and implemented by The Asia Foundation in partnership with the Global Environmental Institute, The Stimson Center, and Vermont Law School.

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